Background Research Paper No. 9

The Language of Play and The Power to Limit Gender-Role Stereotypes

Tarsha E. Bluiett
University of Montevallo

Cynthia Szymanski Sunal and Craig S. Shwery
University of Alabama
The Office of Research on Teaching in the Disciplines

Just as young children acquire an understanding of language through social interactions with parents, peers, and even the media, so, too, do pre-schoolers acquire gender knowledge. Different beliefs about learning lead to various perspectives on how children acquire gender knowledge. From the perspective of biological theory, (Christie et al., 2007), children are born with inherent gender-oriented roles which are innate and therefore, unchanging. This school of thought argues that girls are born with feminine, care-giving identities and are naturally suited to the roles of mothering and housekeeping, whereas boys are born with hunter and protector tendencies which lead to roles of dominance. For example, Bluiett (2009) observed females cuddling baby dolls and males often were observed engaging in rough play with other males and many times acted in a callous manner with materials and objects. Biological theorists would anticipate that the play of young children, as well as the language they use during play, would be reflective of the static nature of inborn tendencies. A different perspective is held by social learning theorists (Christie et al., 2007) who believe that the acquisition of the concept of gender occurs as children observe the world around them. In this example from Bluiett’s (2009) study, as girls’ interacted while pretending to use cell phones, the language exhibited gender dominance:

JG in loud sing-song voice: “I told you six times, not to call me!”
RF: “Do you want to play that game?”
CJ: “I want to play it. Boyfriend, I told you six times, not to call me!”
JG: “Come on, CJ.”
Teacher (SF): “Is that the way to talk to people on the phone?”
JG: “It’s my boyfriend.”
C J: “I told you six times not to call me!”
JG: “I told you six times not to call me!”
SF: “JG if you called your grandmother on the phone, how would you talk to your grandmother?”
JG: “Hello. Goodbye! Boyfriend, I told you six times. I told you not to call me.”

Through watching sex-typed behaviors and observing these behaviors reinforced through attitudes and examples in the world around them, children in this study began to imitate and eventually adopt gender specific behaviors. In contrast, cognitive developmental theorists (Christie et al., 2007) suggest that children participate in the process of gender role acquisition by constructing their own understanding of the gender models they see around them, rather than being uncontrolocally shaped by biological or social forces. Children, for example, may say “Boys play with trucks and girls play with dolls.” This perspective acknowledges the active participation of children in making sense of the gendered messages they receive. All three perspectives offer insight into the acquisition of gender knowledge and the potential of dramatic play and oral language in minimizing sex-role stereotyping. Starting around age two and increasing throughout the pre-school years, children begin to demonstrate gender awareness and gender-role stereotypes (Christie et al., 2007).

Accurately or inaccurately, pre-schoolers construct culturally sanctioned messages regarding which gender-related behaviors are and are not acceptable (Scott, 2000). Children develop deeply engrained beliefs about what boys and girls should and should not do (Scott, 2000). Often these beliefs are reflected in the oral language used, as well as in the toys and activities selected for play. For example,

JG: “I am the bride.” You are the flower girl. “Can you help me put on my dress?”
MM: “Okay. Hey, can Zach be in the wedding?”
JG: “No, this is for girls only.”
MM: “But boys are in weddings, too!”

The entrenchment of gender-specific expectations and behaviors was noted by Martin and Fabes (2001) in their observations of same-gender play groups. They found that children who play more frequently with same-sex peers tend to demonstrate more gender-typical behaviors than children who play with opposite sex peers. Girls, for example, who play most often with other girls tend to be less active during play and boys who play primarily with other boys tend to be more aggressive during play. Same-gender play episodes revealed patterns of verbal exchange that reinforced gender schemes (Bluiett, 2009). Children, for example, were observed while engaging in pretend conversations using toy cell phones, and differences in oral language among genders were noted (Bluiett, 2009). One male began his conversation with another male by saying, “What are you doing, butt head?” The two continued to talk in a
manner that mimicked the language of older teens. In contrast, a girl greeted another girl with a singsong, “Whatcha’ doin?” and the two engaged in a friendly exchange of language similar to mature adult women (Bluiett, 2009).

Play situations have strong cognitive and social learning potential because they provide natural opportunities for children to use language in developing an understanding about their world (Perlmutter & Burrell, 1995). Not surprisingly, language is a significant factor in social play scenarios in which children take on the gender roles of others. In the following example a boy and a girl negotiate roles while interacting:

OG: “May I take your order?”
MJ: “Yes, I would like coffee.”
OG: “With or without sugar and cream?”
MJ: “With sugar and cream, please.”

In the context of play, language is used as children negotiate the scene and learn to cooperate with each other. It is the means by which children manipulate and extend the play scenario, as well as construct gender schemes (Guddemi, 2000). Attending to the language children use during play may offer hope for helping children develop more androgynous ways of thinking and interacting.

Children have been shown to acquire gender knowledge and stereotypes at a young age, and teachers will have no easy task in erasing these deeply held ideas (Van Hoorn, 2003). Today’s teachers need a toolkit of effective strategies for intervening in the play of young children. Below are a set of recommendations to promote effective intervention strategies.

1. During play, help young children recognize the limitations of exclusive language and develop the skills of inclusive language.

Because language plays an important role in the way in which gender is represented in our society, how a child uses language during play can reveal much about his or her notion of gender. The attentive teacher will listen for the use of exclusive or inclusive language as children playfully interact with each other. If a teacher hears a child say, “Only boys can play with trucks,” then he or she might gently counter with, “In our classroom boys and girls can play with trucks.” It could be that teachers, as well as students, need direct instruction in the use of appropriate examples of inclusive language versus stereotypic language. What does it mean to use gender appropriate language? “Let’s all line up,” rather than “Line up guys.” In daily dialogue and conversation, young children learn to model questions as well as how to respond to them. Sociodramatic play provides children an opportunity to experiment with dialogue.
2. Use mixed gender groups during play to demonstrate the integration of behaviors traditionally thought to belong exclusively to one sex or the other.

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003), suggest that “Gender segregation in childhood almost certainly plays some role in the development of gendered verbal practice” (p. 25). When children are limited in their interaction with opposite sex peers, this is reflected in the language they use. Teachers can guard against this tendency by ensuring that both play and learning groups include boys and girls.

Within the groups teachers should make sure that girls and boys are provided equal access and time with toys that are typically reserved for the opposite sex. In addition, teachers should, on occasion, quietly intervene to reorganize groups that segregate themselves by sex. Cross-sex interaction among children that is guided by a sensitive teacher can help minimize the gender stereotypes children bring to school. Children begin to see that both sexes are capable of engaging in similar activities and accomplishing similar tasks. When children cooperate in groups to accomplish specific tasks, teachers should make sure that both girls and boys have an opportunity to lead. Both may take on a variety of roles within the group.

3. Provide opportunities to practice flexible gender roles in the classroom through dramatic play.

Teachers can foster productive, literate play by designing classroom physical structures and play tools that are conducive to playful learning. Play episodes, such as the post office event in this study, were observed to allow children to take more defined roles in their play. It is important to consider how classrooms are structured so that spontaneous, literate language interactions can thrive. Scott and McCollum (2000) suggest that teachers should “eliminate the assignment of sex-stereotyped tasks and provide opportunities for all children to participate in all activities” (p. 186). Bluiett (2009) found it evident that both genders used language to “test” or even “fix” problems that occurred in play episodes or to keep the play episodes moving, so teachers should consider watching how children are able to use language to solve problems. For example, JG told MJ, “I do not want boys following me.” During instances of this nature, teachers often reminded children to “use their words” if emotions became too strong during play interaction.

4. During play, handle the management of inappropriate behaviors equitably.

Teacher expectations about appropriate classroom behavior can either serve as a positive role model for gender equity or can inadvertently reinforce unhealthy stereotypes. Teachers should discourage the same inappropriate classroom behavior equally in boys and girls. Whether dealing with loud and boisterous behaviors or quiet, deferential behaviors, teachers should hold similar classroom expectations for both girls and boys. Inappropriate aggression should not be tolerated, and extreme passivity
challenged equally for both girls and boys. “Teachers should provide all children with opportunities for engaging in and receiving praise for such behaviors as curiosity, cooperation, assertiveness, and helpfulness. “In this manner, the teacher demonstrates appropriate school behavior, not gender behavior” (Scott & McCollum, 2000, p. 177).

Growing up in a diverse society makes it imperative for children to develop gender equity schemes. Pre-school teachers have a responsibility to foster language development and social interactions of their young students. Genishi and Dyson (1984) reported that language specialists have become very aware of the social context of development including adult-child interaction and child-child interaction in home and out-of-home settings, pointing out that “when studying children’s language, we take into account both linguistic and social abilities” (p. 12).

Social situations and interactions can have tremendous effects on the child’s language development and the kinds of language the child produces, such as non-gender stereotypes. If children can learn to use language in varied situations, adults can facilitate that versatility by providing opportunities for play and talk (and later reading and writing).

Research on play and its relationship to social and language development has been conducted by many (Pellegrini, Vulkelich, & Neumon, 1998). Current research on early literacy outcomes shows a relationship between active socially engaging play and early language development. Social skills, oral language development, and sociodramatic play go hand in hand. Children who are provided with play opportunities in multi-age settings broaden their own understandings of the social world and of language diversity (Roskos, 1995). The growing emphasis on the teaching of early language and literacy skills in child care, pre-school, and other learning settings stems from important research linkage (Neuman & Roskos, 1993). Social play is a significant contributor to early language development and later literacy indicators (Christie, 1998; Morrow, 2001; International Reading Association, 2002; Strickland, 1997). A noted group of early literacy specialists (Christie, 1998; Morrow, 2001; Neuman & Roskos, 1993; Strickland & Strickland, 1997) documented the significant effect of hands-on socially engaging early literacy experiences on the literacy readiness and pre-reading skills of young children in pre-school and kindergarten settings. Although not always regarded as “reading” in a formal sense, acquisition of these print meaning associations is viewed as an important precursor to more skilled reading (Goodman, 1986).

References


